

H-France Review Vol. 16 (June 2016), No. 84

Frederick C. Schneid, ed., *European Armies of the French Revolution, 1789-1802*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 288 pp. Tables, notes. \$27.70 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0806140391.

Review by Christopher Tozzi, Howard University.

While the military history of the French revolutionary wars that began in 1792 may not have been written solely by the victors—many British and American historians have contributed to it, too—it has certainly tended to be written only about the victors. The French army during the revolutionary decade has been subject to extensive study. Rafe Blaufarb, Jean-Paul Bertaud, John Lynn, and Samuel Scott, among others, have produced excellent monographs on the army's internal make-up, organization, and evolution over the course of the revolutionary decade.[1] T.C. W. Blanning has analyzed the army's campaigns and endeavored to explain why the French succeeded by the early nineteenth-century in conquering wide stretches of northern Europe and Italy.[2] David Bell and Jean-Yves Guimar have examined the relationship between the French army, the war, and social, political, and cultural change in revolutionary France.[3]

Yet for all of this, historians, especially English-speaking ones, know strikingly little about the armies against which the French fought. This is not surprising. The French revolutionary army has drawn so much interest because it represented the microcosm of a society undergoing radical change. In contrast, the states that fought against France during the revolutionary decade experienced comparatively minimal social and political upheaval (at least before French armies overran parts of them). They have thus elicited little attention from historians seeking to explain what changed during the revolutionary decade, not what remained the same.

The contributors to this volume, however, contend that, at least in the military realm, states other than France were not as static during the 1790s as a teleological reading of their recurring defeats at the hands of the French revolutionaries would imply. Instead, these authors suggest, it is only by examining the national armies of all the states that participated in the revolutionary wars that historians can fully understand the momentous military changes of the period. That is what this volume does, through a series of chapters that focus individually on the army of a specific country or set of small countries.

The book opens with an essay by Frederick Schneid on the French revolutionary army. The material here will not be new to scholars who are already well versed in French revolutionary military history. The chapter nonetheless provides an excellent, easily readable synthesis of the French army's development over the course of the revolutionary decade. Schneid concisely and clearly explains complex and frequently confusing dimensions of French revolutionary military history, such as the relationship between the line army, the volunteer battalions, and the National Guard. The sharp writing and rich information make this chapter a valuable source for students in need of a summary of the topic, and for scholars seeking a primer on a part of revolutionary history that has received little attention in most recent works on the Revolution as a whole.

Apart from reconsidering the effectiveness of the French army during the first year of the revolutionary war that began in April 1792, Schneid does not make a strong argument in his chapter. It is more narrative than analytical. The same is true of most of the other chapters in the book, but not all.

The chapter that does the most to advance a pointed argument is the second one, on the Prussian army. Seeking to debunk depictions of Prussian diplomatic and military forces during the French Revolution as inept and disengaged, Dennis Showalter contends that “Prussia between 1788 and 1806 pursued a comprehensible and defensible foreign policy, based on a close and comprehensible synergy between diplomacy and force” (p. 36). He argues that the Prussians maintained a highly effective army that could hold its own against the French (the Prussian defeat at Valmy in September 1792, he writes, was merely “a case of opening-night jitters” [p. 46]). At the same time, however, they “managed to avoid serious combat” at most points in the revolutionary wars, saving them from squandering precious personnel and resources on a protracted conflict (p. 47). That the Prussians found themselves divided from potential allies and conquered by Napoleon at Jena in 1806 was the result, according to Showalter, not of incompetent leadership, but of a reasonable belief (which French troops unexpectedly shattered at Austerlitz in 1804) that the other European powers were evenly matched and would wear one another down without the need for Prussian intervention.

Showalter is less clear in explaining why otherwise shrewd Prussian diplomats and military advisers would have failed to predict Napoleon's ability to overwhelm his enemies at Austerlitz before the fact, when Prussian intervention might have obviated the need to confront the French alone later. Nor does he account adequately for the Prussian failure to maintain an army that could combat the French successfully at Jena. Still, his arguments regarding the effectiveness of Prussian forces earlier in the revolutionary wars are compelling. For historians of the French army, who have tended to conclude that France's opponents lost the wars because they clung to outmoded Old Regime military strategies, this chapter is enlightening.

Similarly, Peter Wilson makes an interesting case for reevaluating the performance of another group of German-speaking forces, those of the principalities of the Holy Roman Empire. Noting that historians have tended to write off the poor military record of these states as symptomatic of the broader decline of the Empire beginning in 1648, Wilson argues, “the empire's defeat cannot be explained by drawing a false contrast with France since this implies that there was only one route to modernity and that the empire had chosen the wrong path” (p. 187). Wilson's nuanced analysis of various German armies, which includes valuable quantitative information on the population size, army size, and revenues of many of the states, shows that it is wrong to conclude that all of the German troops failed to confront the French effectively. Certain armies performed well, indicating that they had adapted successfully to military modernity despite the supposedly archaic political and social structures that undergirded them. Wilson concludes that, ultimately, it was not their inability to modernize in the image of the French so much as the failure of the Prussians and especially the Austrians to support the German princes consistently that caused their loss on the battlefield.

In another argumentative chapter, Charles Esdaile contends that the Spanish army during the revolutionary wars was more effective than historians have recognized. Although Spain did little to influence the outcome of the wars, its armies managed to invade French territory effectively. They also held onto it longer than any of the forces operating on France's eastern and northern frontiers. Although Esdaile admits that the Spanish army was not “a particular paragon of virtue in military terms when war broke out between Spain and France in 1793,” he argues that most other European forces shared its problems, and that Spanish troops received unique bolstering from institutions such as the Church, which encouraged enlistment (p. 148). Ultimately, Esdaile suggests that historians should not evaluate Spain's role in the war from the simple perspective of its ultimate defeat and transformation into a French ally in 1796.

Other essays present information that, though often less surprising, offers a concise and clear overview of other armies that fought the French during the revolutionary decade. With impressive quantitative precision, Edward Coss traces the organizational and fiscal mechanisms that helped assure the success of British forces. Janet Hartley explores the Russian campaigns against the French at the end of the 1790s. She argues that general Alexander Suvorov's ability to wage an effective war against the French in Italy, far from supply depots in Russia, reflected the successful military reforms that Russian leaders had undertaken in the eighteenth century, including the centralization and standardization of military institutions, even though the Russian army remained hampered by poor financial structures. Lee Eysturlid offers an overview of the Austrian army's composition and campaigns, explaining its poor performance in terms of Austria's being "a thoroughly early modern state, incapable of internal, liberal political reform" (p. 64). That analysis is unlikely to surprise many historians. Still, it is notable given that other work, including Blanning's, tends to focus on military distractions in central Europe, rather than on domestic challenges, as the main reason for Austrian failure to defeat revolutionary France.

Even the armies of states that rarely feature in military histories of the revolutionary era receive attention in this book. Ciro Paoletti studies the forces of the Italian states to explain why they fared so poorly in fighting the French. For the Ottoman army, Virginia Askan offers an evaluation that credits the Ottoman leadership with having implemented effective military reforms that made Ottoman troops operate more like European armies of the time, although she emphasizes that British assistance made a crucial contribution to the ability of the Ottomans to resist French invasion of their territory.

For all of the original perspectives that this volume contains on national armies operating in Europe, its scope is strictly limited in ways that are somewhat surprising, if understandable. For one, it includes little discussion of the guerrilla forces that fought independently of national armies. The French would not feel the full brunt of partisan resistance until the establishment of the Napoleonic Empire, so it is not especially remarkable that this volume does not include a chapter devoted to such forces. Still, these troops did operate against the French in some contexts during the 1790s, especially in Italy. Greater consideration of them might have helped to flesh out the book's subject more fully.

Similarly, there is little discussion of French forces other than those aligned with the revolutionary regime in Paris. The war in the Vendée, the federalist revolt centered around Lyon, and the émigré army do not feature significantly in this volume. This absence, too, is not especially surprising, since a comprehensive military history of the civil war inside France has not yet been written, and would entail more original research than an edited volume of this type can support. Yet, it is nonetheless notable that, in an age when historians are so eager to think beyond the nation state, the coverage of French forces here is limited to those associated with the only French state that endured the wars.

The volume also does not engage the colonial context of the wars. Of course, much remains to be learned about the nature and operations of various armies in places such as Saint-Domingue and India during the French Revolution. Writing this history would require a thick monograph filled with original research, not a synthetic essay that could be inserted into a volume like this one. Still, this is a notable absence, especially in light of the increasing attention to the colonial and international context of the Revolution in recent decades.

Lastly, the essays here generally cater to historians of operational military history more than they advance the field of "new" military history. The authors focus on how the armies fought and why they won or lost battles. To the extent that the essays touch on broader themes, they do so largely to explain military success or defeat in terms of the political institutions or social makeup of various states. In this respect, the volume is different from the work of the historians cited at the beginning of this review, most of whom have studied the French revolutionary army and wars as a way of understanding issues that extend much further than military operations and tactics.

I mention the lack of engagement with the topics outlined above not as a criticism of this work, but as a note for historians who might seek to find in it something that the volume's editor and contributors chose not to include. For readers interested in the subject this book does treat—the history of the national armies of European states on traditional battlefields during the French revolutionary wars—this is an excellent resource that significantly expands upon the English-language literature in this niche.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Frederick C. Schneid, “The French army”

Dennis Showalter, “The Prussian army”

Lee Eysturlid, “The Austrian army”

Janet M. Harley, “The Russian army”

Edward J. Coss and Josh Howard, “The British army”

Charles Esdaile, “The Spanish army”

Peter H. Wilson, “The armies of the German princes”

Ciro Paoletti, “The armies of the Italian states”

Virginia H. Aksan, “The Ottoman army”

NOTES

[1] Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750-1820: Careers, Merit, Talent* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La Révolution armée: les soldats-citoyens et la Révolution française* (Paris: Laffont, 1979); John Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Samuel F. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution: The Role and Development of the Line Army 1787-93* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Also of note is recent work that examines the French army on the eve of (but, for the most part, not during) the Revolution, including Arnaud Guinier, *L'honneur du soldat: éthique martiale et discipline guerrière dans la France des Lumières (1748-1789)* (Ceyzérieu dans l'Ain: Éditions Champ Vallon, 2014); Julia Osman, *Citizen Soldiers and the Key to the Bastille* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Christy Pichichero's forthcoming book, tentatively titled *The Military Enlightenment: War and Culture in France and the French Atlantic from Louis XIV to Napoleon*.

[2] T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (London: Arnold, 1996).

[3] Jean-Yves Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale : XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Félin, 2004); David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

Christopher Tozzi
Howard University

christopher.tozzi@gmail.com

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172